

2011

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Recommended Citation

Keshishian, Ruth, A Biography of a Bookshop, *Kunapipi*, 33(1), 2011.
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol33/iss1/16>

A Biography of a Bookshop

Abstract

The Moufflon Bookshop is part of a large sandstone building in the 'liner' style of curved architecture from the nineteen forties; it is now dwarfed by the high rise buildings that surround and block the original view of the uninterrupted line of the Kyrenia Mountains. But a photograph which I keep at the front desk, enjoyed by customers, shows the same location in the quite recent past, where sheep are grazing amongst the shrubs and rocky terrain just outside the visible renaissance Venetian walled city of Nicosia.

RUTH KESHISHIAN

A Biography of a Bookshop

OUTSIDE THE VENETIAN WALLS

The Moufflon Bookshop is part of a large sandstone building in the 'liner' style of curved architecture from the nineteen forties; it is now dwarfed by the high rise buildings that surround and block the original view of the uninterrupted line of the Kyrenia Mountains. But a photograph which I keep at the front desk, enjoyed by customers, shows the same location in the quite recent past, where sheep are

grazing amongst the shrubs and rocky terrain just outside the visible renaissance Venetian walled city of Nicosia.

When my brother Jirayr Keshishian [1940–1992] returned to the island, he chose Sofouli Street as the location for his new shop which he opened in 1967, although it was considered to be well out of town. The island had become an independent Republic in 1960, but by 1963 the inter-communal tension had resulted in the Turkish community living in enclaves. Books in Turkish published locally, or imported from Turkey, were sold at several Turkish booksellers, while books in Greek which is spoken by the majority of the population, published locally or imported from Greece, were sold at the numerous Greek booksellers. There seemed to be a need for an international bookshop, that could import foreign

language books, especially in English as it was a familiar language still spoken after the eighty or so years of British rule.

Moufflon Bookshop stocks books primarily in English but it has a service in bringing books regularly from Europe, and at times from other parts of the world to cater for the fast growing foreign population of people tied to trade; for the professional labour force;



for refugees; for asylum seekers; and of course for the ever changing diplomatic community on the island.

THE OLD AND THE NEW



I took over the running of the shop at the start of 1995, having returned from Britain after 35 years of absence. When I entered the shop and began to shape its future, my initial and lasting decision was to place new titles alongside the out-of-print books, but not publications earlier than 1850 as I had no knowledge of antiquarian books. It was clearly a strange move as the majority of local

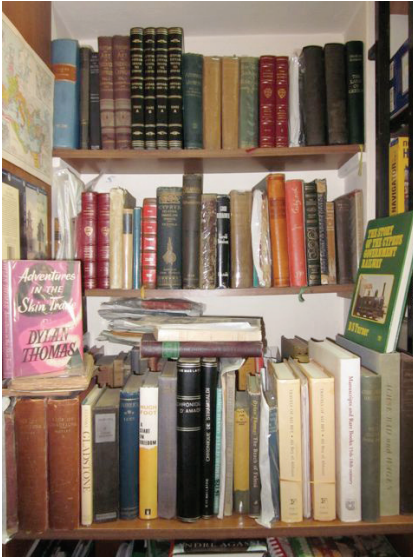
customers were used to purchasing books in pristine condition. Yet over the years the interest in all types of books developed, and in time encouraged us — the staff — to mount our first Book Fair of out-of-print, used and rare books, held in the old city of Nicosia at the start of November 2000. It has become an annual event and one that attracts book-lovers of all ages from around the island.

A STROLL THROUGH THE BOOKSHOP

Books related to history surround you as you step into the shop. The titles cover world history — ancient, mediaeval and modern — politics, international relations, war, peace, conflict resolution and political philosophy. There is a large section on titles that relate to neighbouring countries of the Eastern Mediterranean, and another more recent section on the history of European countries and especially topics related to the European Union.

At the heart of the shop are books relating to Cyprus which is by far the richest section and most in demand. Books on our archaeology are of particular interest to the international community. Archaeologists in their annual expeditions discover sites and artefacts that result in the re-writing of our early history





10,500 BC–330 AD. It is no longer considered derivative of much greater civilisations of the neighbouring countries, but a history and culture that has its distinct features. Books on Byzantine culture and history abound. More recently, there has been a growing interest in all aspects of our Latin mediaeval monuments, trade links, literature, and of course the crusades. Books in English on the Ottoman period are just beginning to appear. The British period is very well documented, as are the fifty years of the Republic.

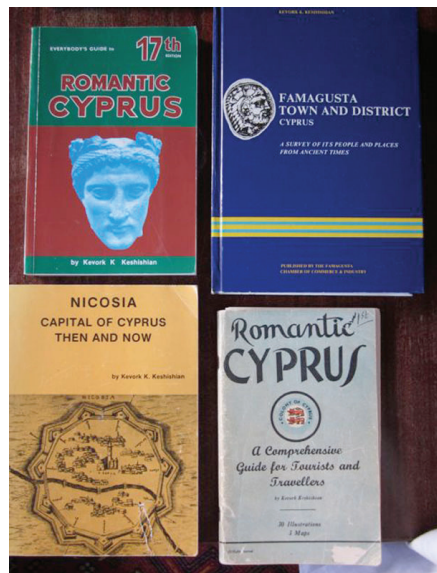
In the same room are books on Natural History and Science, Philosophy, Religion and Cultural studies. The centre shelves carry all the

books related to Cypriot literature, mostly in English, but also in other languages. Alongside are books on world poetry, classical literature — Latin, Greek and Sanskrit — and poetry magazines both local and foreign.

Books on the visual and performing arts are found in the large adjacent room. They include books related to Cypriot Fine Arts, Photography, Architecture, Music, Drama and Dance. Beyond, in the circular balcony, are the books for children and the young readers. Here we make it a point to have a rich selection of bi-lingual books for children who are being taught and talked to in several languages.

Along the lengthy corridor are the books on literature — short stories and novels — paperbacks, hardbacks and first editions, journals, diaries, letters, essays, critical works and biographies. And beyond, in the second balcony, are the books on linguistics, dictionaries and a wide choice of books on language learning.

Books on cookery and beverage, and health are shelved in an in-



between passage that leads to the Travel section. There we stock maps, including geological ones of the island, world guidebooks, and travel photography books, and a fine section on travel literature. Cyprus prides itself on having had a steady stream of visitors throughout the centuries who have recorded their impression of the island and its people.

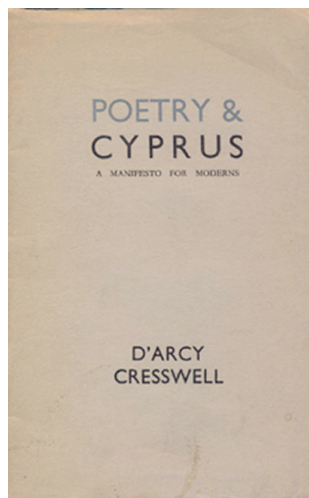
The office space is where customers may leaf through catalogues or look up the book bank to place orders. It is also the space where we process books for export, as the Cypriot diaspora is widespread in almost all continents. Scholars working on Cyprus are growing in number, and customers who wish to continue their interest in the island after their travels look up our website and place their orders (www.moufflon.com.cy).

CYPRIOI LITERATURE IN TRANSLATION

The shelves that stock local literature are expanding continually. Poetry is by far the most popular literary form, followed by short stories. There are very few novelists and playwrights. The majority of writing is in the local languages, but there is a growing number of writers who have chosen to write in English — sustaining the slender thread of the island's colonial literature. The journals *Focus*, *Cadences*, and more recently *Cyprus Dossier*, accept new writing.

A considerable volume of local writing is being translated into English and other European languages. Several local universities during the last decade or so offer Literature both as undergraduate and postgraduate courses in English. This has certainly stimulated the writing of Cypriot literature in English. There has been a whole process of translating Cypriot literature into other languages — at present mostly European: it is something that will surely develop over the coming years.

As a bookseller, I receive information of titles from abroad well ahead of their publication date — at times even manuscripts in progress. They are mostly from Cypriots in the diaspora, as well as foreigners who have written down their recollections of the island, or tried their hand at fiction set in Cyprus. There are several independent presses as well as universities throughout the world who have an interest in our literature, offering courses and carrying out translations and bringing out publications of great interest — Australia, Canada, Germany, USA, France, Russia, Rumania, Bulgaria, Italy the Netherlands and most recently Spain. There are also foreign journals, magazines and anthologies that have begun to include our literature, so I try to bring copies to the bookshop for our local readers to be in touch with the activities abroad.



REGARDING THE ORAL TRADITION

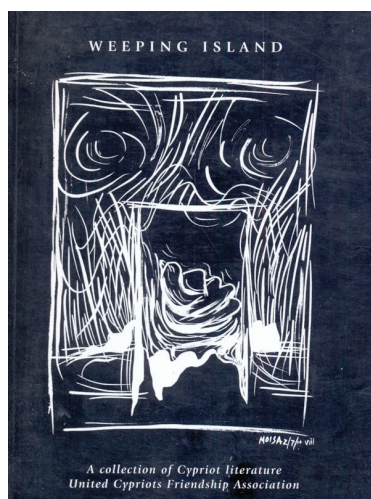
The oral tradition is still very strong amongst both the Greek and Turkish population. It's a vibrant layer below the standard languages that are taught at schools and used officially throughout the island. Poetry, narrative and epic recitations — often heard at village feast days or festivals — have been recorded, and more recently transliterated and published. I try to stock these for the shop, both in book form and DVD / CDs. Some have been translated into English, as in the works Hambis Tsangaris. In addition to the dictionaries that capture the regional vocabulary, whether in Turkish or Greek, there is a publication of the first Greek Cypriot / English dictionary by Roys Papagelou (2001).

BIRTH OF A NEW SCRIPT

I look forward to literature being published in the Cypriot-Maronite language, and subsequently translated into English and other languages, sitting alongside our books. The recently created script for this endangered language has enabled the younger generation to be taught at their own schools. Several villages on the island are inhabited by a community of people called Maronites, who are distinguished primarily by their religion. It's a branch of Christianity that looks up to the Vatican, but had its origins in ancient Syria-Lebanon. Over the centuries the Maronites became Hellenised and wrote their literary works in Greek, which we stock at the shop. Alexander Borg who has been studying the language in depth is writing a monograph for Moufflon Publications about the process of creating the script.

THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

It was interesting to see a series of texts in print, both creative and critical, that appeared on our shelves during the last decade. They seem to map out a new strand in the literary life of the island. A chapter in *Post-Colonial and African American Women's Writing*, by Gina Wisker (2000) included a whole chapter on Cyprus; *Step-Mothertongue* edited by Aydın Mehmet Yashin (2000), resulted from a gathering of writers at Middlesex University UK. *Weeping Island*, 2001 was a multi-cultural collection of Cypriot literature; *Cypriot Identities, Conversations on Paper*, edited by K.B. Costello 2005; a new section wedged into the revised edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Post-colonial Literature in English*, edited by Stephanos Stephanides (2005); *A Tribute to Cypriot Literature* edited by L. Papaleontiou, Quebec, Canada (2007); and



conference publication *Cultures of Memory, Memory of Culture* (2007), edited by Stephanos Stephanides all seemed to open up the subject both to the general reader, as well as to some students (UK, USA, Austria, Germany, Cyprus) who have chosen to pursue their postgraduate work on Cypriot Literature.

ON MOUFFLON PUBLICATIONS

The overarching theme of the publications is the island of Cyprus in all its aspects and in the context of the eastern Mediterranean. Our aim is to highlight the lesser known history and culture of the island, both in a book form, or as forty-page monographs. We have in mind local readers, diaspora Cypriots, and others who have shown interest in the culture and history of the island. The editing/design work is carried out by Toby Macklin and the cover design work is by Alex Storer.

The literature series began with the poet Taner Baybars who gave me permission to reprint his memoir, *Plucked in a Far-off Land*, for a paperback edition (2005). The memoir of growing up on the island before the period of modernisation was written in English and therefore there was no process of translation. Capturing the same period is the book written by Andreas Keleshis, about the life of the fishing community at Kyrenia: the fictionalised memoir, *Maistrotramountana*, was translated into English by Andrew Hendry (2007). *My Own Deftera* by Theoklis Kouyialis [see *Artists' Books*] is of particular importance as I wished the memoir written in poetry to be a bi-lingual publication (2007). Nora Liassis, an Australian scholar, and Dean of Humanities at the European University in Nicosia, took on the translation work as she was already familiar with the poet's work.



Most diaspora Cypriots whether in African countries, New Zealand, Australia, Europe, Canada or the USA, have acquired the language of their adopted country and therefore their original language is something still listened to,

but less spoken, and only within the context of their homes. A few venture to weekend classes set up by their communities, and therefore bi-lingual editions would address in particular, the needs of those readers who still have a slight knowledge of the written language.

Andrew Hendry is at present translating into English, a complex novel, *Eastern Mediterranean*, which is set in Nicosia during the difficult months that led to the 1963 civil troubles. It is written by the established novelist and short story writer, Ivi Meleagrou, and will no doubt find a new and wider readership in translation. I came across reference to it in a lecture and later the publication *The Rustling of*

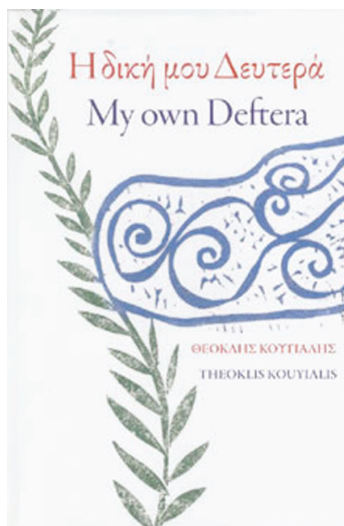
the Palms and the Violet Hue of Pentadakylos: Writing the Myth of Nicosia in Cypriot Prose by the literary scholar, Nadia Charalambidou (1995). The novel, *The Heart of the Earth*, written in Serbian by Svetislav Basara during his stay in Cyprus, is being translated from Serbian into English by Randall Major.

The Fabric of the Ancient Theatre (2004, hardback; 2007, paperback) is a journal written during the University of Sydney excavation of the Paphos theatre from 1995. The author, Diana Wood Conroy, travelled to the neighbouring countries of Egypt, Turkey and Greece, in search of similar Hellenistic theatres. The volume includes her sketches, paintings and weavings inspired by her work on the Roman frescos of the theatre precinct. A related publication is due out this year: *Letters Home*

1927–1931 written by the youngest member of the Swedish expedition, Alfred Westholm, and translated by Ann Wohl. In his writings he captures everyday life in rural Cyprus, describes the landscape in detail, discusses the archaeological finds, and writes of his encounters with the villagers who work with him. Late 2012 will see the publication of George Seferis's *Journals* written during his three visits to Cyprus in the fifties, and translated into English by Andrew Hendry. The poet had a particular feel for the island, and produced numerous poems as a result

of his travels, encounters and experiences. I am also working on the *Journals* written by John Lehmann, editor of *New Writing*, during his visit to Cyprus in the fifties. A few of his poems were published in the *Cyprus Review*, and he returned to England with a handful of Cypriot poems in translation which were then published in his *London Magazine*.

The forty-page monographs published by Moufflon touch on a wide range of subjects. One that has a literary association is the forthcoming publication on *The Dukhobors in Cyprus 1898–1999*. Impressed by their simple devout life, Leo Tolstoy took an unfinished manuscript which he had put aside and completed it. The sales of *Resurrection* provided some of the money which helped the Dukhobors / Spirit Wrestlers



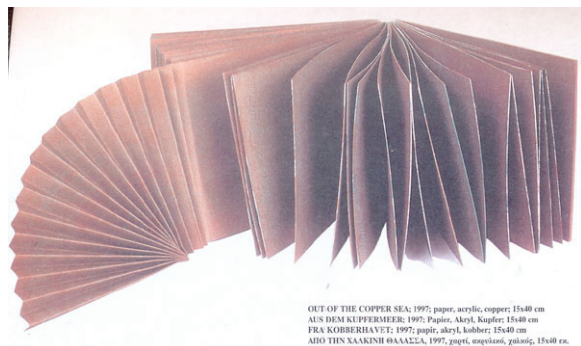
arrive safely on Cyprus from Russia and then move on to settle in Canada a year later. Also of interest to the literary history of the island will be the monograph, *The Correspondence between the Poets, Mary O'Conner and Kypros Chrysathis*, during the years of the independence struggle from the British. Andis Panayiotis found the folder of letters in an archive and has researched the background to this strange literary encounter. His own doctoral research on 'The Translation of Greek Cypriot Poetry into English since the Turn of the 20th Century' will be published by Minnesota University Modern Greek Press.

A recent publication of ours is *Entrelacs Chiprois* by Gilles Grivaud (2009) in French. The author discusses the writings in Greek, Latin, Italian and French during the period of Lusignan and Venetian rule 1191–1570, in the context of the intellectual life of the island.

EXHIBITION OF ARTISTS' BOOKS

The idea of allocating a small area to display artists' books — one-of-a-kind or multiples — throughout the year came to mind when I was restoring the shop in 1995. I was introduced to the art form by the Scottish artist and poet, Ian Hamilton Finlay in 1962 when I was studying in Edinburgh. It has been a joy to see the development of artists' books throughout the subsequent decades. Bringing books from abroad was straightforward as Book Art has flourished across all continents since the 1960s.

It took a while to discover local artists and encourage them to try their hand at making books in Cyprus. Mary Plant (b. 1944 in Famagusta) had already been working on her *Aphrodite's Library* using classical texts to inspire her in the



OUT OF THE COPPER SEA; 1997; paper, acrylic, copper; 15x40 cm
AUS DEM KUPFERMEER; 1997; Papier, Acryl, Kupfer; 15x40 cm
FRA KOBBERHAVET; 1997; papir, akryl, kobber; 15x40 cm
ΑΠΟ ΤΗΣ ΣΑΑΚΙΝΗΣ ΘΑΛΑΣΣΗΣ; 1997; χαρτί, ακρυλικά, χαλκός; 15x40 εκ.

shaping and detail of her books. Horst Weierstall (b. 1944 Wuppertal) who had made Cyprus his home since the 1980s, continues to find inspiration from modern and contemporary literary texts in the shaping of his books. Fifteen years on, numerous young artists have joined in

exhibitions, and participated in the annual exhibitions of altered books.

Of great significance was finding the joint works of the painter Christoforos Savva (1924–1968) and the poet Theoklis Kouyialis (see Moufflon Publications). Savva had returned from Paris having studied with Andre Lhote. He most probably saw many exhibitions of Livres d'artiste especially those promoted by Stratis Eleftheriades of Lesbos, Greece, who had set up a publishing house, Teriade, mainly for artists' books.

On his return to Cyprus, Savva met the young poet and was impressed with his more experimental writings. In 1963, he suggested that the poems be written by hand on large art paper. He then worked on and around the text with his art work and collage technique. In 1998, in memory of Savva, I chose 10 of the 15 sheets and displayed them in the corner of the shop: we were happy to realise that these were in fact the start of the Book Art tradition in Cyprus.

THE FUTURE OF BOOKSHOPS

Physical bookshops seem once again to be in a precarious situation. The Kindle has arrived on the island, as well as ebooks and ipads. Certain customers prefer to place their orders online. But there are those who still enjoy visiting the bookshop regularly, browsing and buying books, enjoying the whole process of isolating volumes, looking at the cover or dustjacket, the binding, the pages, the print, as well as the content. These individuals are the ones who encourage us to continue the traditional book culture.

My brother's insight in 1967 was that books, like the rare moufflons, (an agile mountain sheep unique to Cyprus) could be fostered and developed. In 2011 the once near-extinct moufflon is now prolific, coming down from the mountain forests to nibble on vine shoots near villages. Books too can transcend the endangered status, flourishing quietly when tended with care and attention to the needs of writers and readers.

